



Louis S. Bruneni, who has served customers for 50 years in his grocery store at 614 Prairie St., laughs as he recalls good times with, left to right, Jack Hutchins; Elmer Gishwiler and Ralph A. Johnson, both brothers-in-law of Bruneni; George W. Healy. Paul Robinson and Raymond H. Vestal.

Friends Fete Grocer, 73; Store Doomed by Bridge

By WARREN W. KELLOGG
Morning Star Staff Writer

"I've seen a lot of people come and go in this place. Now I'm going too."

Snow-haired Louis Sanford Bruneni, for half a century the favorite grocer of generations of residents in a near North Side area, spoke the words with his customary chuckle, but he wasn't really happy.

Bruneni's little grocery store at 614 Prairie St. falls victim to progress within weeks — perhaps days.

A neighborhood landmark since 1885, it now must be torn down to make way for the approach system to Rockford's Whitman St. Bridge.

"I'm going to miss it all. I'm going to miss the people," said Bruneni, known as "Louie" to his long-time customers and friends.

"I've dealt with people for 50 years, you know, and I love it," Bruneni's words reached several of his friends, who had gathered in the store for a double commemoration — Louie's 73rd birthday and the impending culmination of his friendly service to customers from the Prairie St. address.

A small boy walked to the counter and shoved a comic book cover in front of Bruneni's eyes.

"Can I have this, Louie?" the boy pleaded. "It's only one page."

"Just a cover? Sure, son, take it," Louie answered.

Followed by two companions, the little customer hurried out of the store.

A group of women came in. One of them set a chocolate-coated cake in front of Louie. It was marked: "Happy Birthday."

They sang the familiar birthday song and followed with a chorus of "God Bless You Tomorrow... God Bless You, Louie."

"Be 73 tomorrow (Saturday)," explained Louie, chuckling again as he showed the cake around before placing it in a refrigerated compartment behind his counter.

The cake was baked by Mrs. Betty Kendrick, a regular customer who makes a habit of remembering Bruneni's birthday in one way or another.

In a corner, more of Louie's friends were recalling good times in the little store.

Raymond H. Vestal, who was a born across the street from the store and frequented it when he was a Hall School pupil, recalled driving the grocer's Model T truck, used for deliveries in the 1920s.

"Hey, Louie," Vestal recalled suddenly. "Did you know I learned how to drive with that old Model T of yours?"

Vestal can count five generations of store customers among his relatives. His grandfather, William Fischer, was a familiar figure in the little store — generally surrounded by a host of neighbors.

hood children — even before Bruneni purchased it.

Vestal's mother, Mrs. Bertha Vestal, also shopped there. His sister, Mrs. Iva Checkaris, her daughter, Mrs. Lucille Powers, and Mrs. Powers' daughter, Mrs. Doris Wiggs, also have been customers.

Bruneni learned that Mrs. Wiggs also has a child.

Wouldn't it be something, the group agreed, if they could get Mrs. Wiggs' child in the store before it was torn down? "Then you could say you've had six generations of one family, someone commented.

Louie laughed heartily.

There were other memories that night, destined to be one of the last in the little grocery store.

G. W. Healy recalled "whittling like mad" on the old porch which once fronted the store. Vestal remembered when Bruneni charged a penny for an ice cream cone and was afraid to charge a nickel because it might not sell.

George Becker remembered Edward P. Meckling, another Bruneni customer, who became a general in the Army and was one of the first aviation ordnance authorities in the country.

"There's been a lot of prominent people in this store," mused Becker, glancing over the well-stocked shelves that soon would be empty.

"Arthur L. Johnson, once the local postmaster, President Roosevelt gave him an extra year as postmaster so he could be elected president of the Postmasters of the United States."

"Eddie O'Shay (current Rockford postmaster) used to live right down here," interjected Vestal, pointing. "He'd stop in here on his way to St. James School. You remember, don't you, Louie?"

"Yes," Bruneni chuckled again. "I remember Eddie O'Shay."

A youth in a T-shirt walked to the counter and asked for a half-pound of sugar. Bruneni obliged, shoving the grains from a drawer and carefully weighing them on his scale.

"I do that only for small orders, like a pound," Bruneni explained. "Otherwise, we've got those," he added, nodding with little enthusiasm toward the five- and 10-pound sacks on a shelf behind him.

Someone brought up prices, and Bruneni recalled when butter sold for 15 cents a pound and eggs for 8 cents a dozen.

"The prices have changed," it was noted.

"So have the customers," said Louie. "The customers are different now."

In the old days, they talked about the wars, about current events in general, about changing prices.

Joe McCarron, who formerly operated Rockford Steam Boiler Works, used to sit by the old stove and tell Irish stories.

"He was a traveling salesman, and he knew a lot of them," someone laughed.

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Bruneni recalled that his wife's mother, Mrs. Edith Robinson, purchased the store from the John Cardiff family in 1912, and Bruneni operated it with his wife until she died about 20 years ago.

Bruneni, himself, used to shop in the store when he attended Hall School. He was a soda jerk and later worked in the cutting room at the Stonefield and Evans shoe factory before he made the transition from patron to proprietor at the store just before his 23rd birthday.

Did he think, at that time, he would be there for 50 years? Bruneni laughed loudly.

"After 10 years, I wanted to get out. You know how a young man is."

"But I stayed, and it's a great life, boys. I love it. I enjoy it. I'm going to miss it."

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Combing the store, officers came up with a 12-year-old boy, who tried to run away after he was spotted by police. He informed Sgt. Ben Palmeri that two other boys were in the building.

Capt. Willard Lundberg found a transistor radio and a wristwatch in the boy's pocket. They were identified as being stolen from the store. Meanwhile, other officers were in hot pursuit of another 12-year-old and a 14-year-old, who dodged around counters and behind display racks before being caught.

One of the boys hid in the store when it closed and let the other two in later. All three were charged with burglary. Police said several radios were found discarded in the store, and a gun rack in the sporting goods department was broken open.

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City's Last 6,000 Dead Elms Start Falling Monday

By STANLEY BUCKLES
Morning Star Staff Writer

Rockford's last 6,000 dead elms or public property should begin falling to the woodman's saw Monday, and before the week is over the rate of removal should be 90 elms a day.

T. F. Johnson, Rockford public works commissioner, Saturday said private contractors are about to begin work on those six contracts worth \$333,464 which the City Council approved Sept. 10.

To make sure the job progresses on schedule, Johnson announced he is assigning city inspectors who will keep a daily log on each of the three contractors where they are working, how many trees they take down, and any damages to private property.

The newly named inspectors are Arland Olsen and Joe Dobel, engineering aides in the Public Works Department, and L. W. Marshall, scout for the city forestry division.

Each will be assigned a contractor, explained Johnson. And besides daily reports, he will ask for a month-end summary which will be the basis for payment.

"I feel it's important that we have inspectors right there on the scene to know what's happening," said the commissioner.

With so many inquiries from public officials and private individuals regarding the elm tree removal, Johnson said their questions can be readily answered under the system now devised.

Although the contracts were approved Sept. 10, work has been deferred until indemnifying bonds are posted and the contracts actually signed.

Johnson said he believes E. B. Davis, whose contracts govern three contract areas, should be ready to start Monday. His contracts are for \$56,410.49, \$35,262.51, and \$72,288.40, respectively.

Goebel's Tree Service, which has a \$68,253.78 contract, may be able to begin Monday, too.

The only out-of-town contractor, Trotter Tree Service of New Lenox, holding contracts of \$60,818.60 and \$20,430.86, may be slightly delayed in transferring his crews and equipment here, said Johnson.

Rockford aldermen decided on this crash effort at elm-tree removal to reduce the risk of damage suits against the city as a result of falling trees and branches. The last 6,000 elms are to be down by Jan. 1.

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